

Jazz as the Narrative Mode in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is the first black American woman writer to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, for her novel *Jazz*. In this novel, Morrison ventures a unique narrative mode, the mode of Jazz music. The very name Jazz takes one's imagination to the world of music and entertainment. Music and Fiction are two entirely different genres. The first one depends on oral quality and the second on print. In *Jazz*, Morrison skillfully relates these two different genres by blending her language into that music harmoniously. Her versatility lies in the unique combination of the vital Jazz music and the untold tragedy of the black community which is uprooted and relegated to the secondary status. Morrison, in *Jazz*, by using the complexity and various key elements of Jazz like Polyphony, Improvisation etc., depicts the experiences of the black community in the city of New York during the 1920s, known as the Jazz Age.

Keywords: Black Community, Improvisation, Jazz Music, Narrative Mode, Polyphony, Tragedy

1. Introduction

Morrison always takes up in her novels the raging racial and social issues of her community. She analyses the black experiences carefully expecting an inevitable answer of what is to become of a race oppressed and denied of healthy outlet for their aspirations and yearnings. Such social concerns goad her on to the use of several unique literary devices in her novels. One such device is the Jazz music. Toni Morrison has opted this musical title to her novel *Jazz* because she wants her fiction to do the function of music, the music that expresses the past of black people. She oralizes her fiction by using the songs, folk tunes, standards and blues. Her aim was, "to...remove the print quality of the language to put back the oral quality, where intonation, volume, gesture are all there" (126)¹. Morrison also wants her novel to be open as well as complicated. The mode of Jazz music has this quality. To bring in this quaint complexity which helps her to bring out the

intricacies in the lives of black people, she uses the mode of Jazz as her narrative mode.

2. Jazz Music

Jazz is a kind of music created mainly by black Americans in the early twentieth century through an amalgamation of elements drawn from European American and tribal African music. *Jazz*, as an art form is a combination of diverse elements of orchestral and vocal music as well as dance. The orchestral part of *Jazz* mostly comprises saxophone, piano, clarinet, guitar, brass, drums and so on. Fused into its matrix are blues, march, rag, spirituals and hymns. *Jazz* music is a combination of melody, rhythm and harmony with a basic theme or composition. *Jazz* melody is mainly based on the blues, a sad type of song which painfully expresses the subordinate racial status, low wages and low educational attainments of blacks. Blues, which is an essential feature of *Jazz* expresses this

pain and that itself gives *Jazz* music, a tragic dimension. Whereas Ragtime gives *Jazz* a crucial sense of melody, of form probably of harmony. Spirituals are a form of Afro-American religious music developed from white American or European hymns and psalms that have been sung in an African manner.

3. Jazz

Morrison has aptly synchronized the tone and tenor of *Jazz* music with the lives of the black characters of *Jazz* in particular and with the black community in general. Like many *Jazz* pieces, *Jazz* has a fast opening, establishing a dominant note and theme. The novel itself begins with the epigraph that shows the author's negotiation of the intricate relation between words and sounds:

I am the name of the sound
And the sound of the name
I am the sound of the letter
And the designation of the division(9)²

The entire story is paraphrased right in the beginning of the novel in a paragraph and the first word 'Sth' also represents a colloquial sound from the narrator. The omniscient narrator in *Jazz* introduces the basic theme of the love affair of Dorcas and Joe which comes to a shocking end when Joe shoots Dorcas:

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds
on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband too. He fell for an
eighteen-year-old girl, with one of those deepdown, spooky
loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep
the feeling going (11)²

This story is repeated and modulated at the end, by that of Violet, Joe and Felice, "another true as life Dorcas"(197)². In between the beginning and the end are amplifications, improvisations, variations and solo statements, like a *Jazz* play. To make the readers feel that effect, Morrison breaks the novel into different parts, stories, various voices, various motifs, images and relative themes. The blank pages in between the chapters also serve as a pause in the *Jazz*-like structure that inform and shape the prose, language and narrative tempo. As the first few pages of the novel tell the summary of the

whole story of Violet, Joe and Dorcas, the focus is now on how Morrison uses the mode of *Jazz* to capture the experiences of the black community.

4. Jazz and Jazz

Jazz music originates from mystery, continues with surprises and ends in a sense of renewal. The novel *Jazz* is also a complicated story which moves along, modulates back and forth sometimes in much unexpected ways and human passion is urged as a creative force at the end. Like non stop sequences during a jam session, the sections of *Jazz* never come to a complete stop and keep moving restlessly on and on giving the text a *Jazz* feel. Actually, a jam session urges participation by all the senses. Listeners may clap, tap their feet, dance, carry on conversations, make requests and shout their approval. This is what actually happens in *Jazz*. Along with the narrator, the characters get their respective solos, and have their stories interact with others as in the call-and-response style of *Jazz* music, including the author herself through monologues, interior monologues, flashbacks, reveries and introspection. The main narrative voice now and then intervenes in between the other voices. Like *Jazz*, *Jazz* offers a powerful experience that does not insist on definite meanings. This is how Morrison had brought out in her novel a complete *Jazz* performance.

5. Polyphony and Improvisation

Morrison transposes the music of her people into fiction using its sounds and rhythms in her prose to make her people feel at home. She makes the actions and dialogues in her novels to accompany with a sound track of gospel songs, folk tunes, standards and blues. She uses some of the techniques and mode of *Jazz* music in *Jazz*, to explore the tragic situation of her people. There are several variants of *Jazz*. But polyphony and improvisation are two features that are common to all these variants. Polyphony and improvisation mean the participation of plurality of independent voices in the act of creation. The author uses these two aspects to rework the issues discussed in the opening section of the novel.

The participation of the plural voices brings in *Jazz*, various themes. The narrative simply starts and goes on, apparently without a definite structure, meandering in

various directions all at once it seems. Holding everything together is the guiding narrative voice. It resembles the spontaneity of a *Jazz* performance. Altogether six narrators take part in telling the whole story. Morrison makes these characters to come forward, as it happens in a *Jazz* performance, to tell their own stories. These voices often blend and change, shift into view points that switch and slide, then become voices again. The participation of such plural independent voices resembles the polyphonic nature of *Jazz*. Apart from those stories told by the characters, the omniscient narrator intervenes to tell stories such as Rose Dear, Violet's Mother; Vera Louise, True Belle's Mistress and Wild, Joe's Mother. These stories are told in various stages of the development of the novel through improvisation.

The plural voices take part in telling the story and the content of the novel is brought out by the narrative form. The narrative mode is such well knit by the author. The plural voices bring plural moods, perceptions and emotions with its depths that bring the many dimensional picture of the black experience. The expectation is that as these stories are told and retold, they would take on newly imagined lives again and again. Morrison herself has said in an interview about *Jazz*:

I wanted the story to be the vehicle which moved us from page one to the end, but I wanted the delight to be found in moving away from the story and coming back to it, as though it were a prism constantly turning(268)³.

This is quite evident as one looks at the way Morrison has presented her characters.

Violet is perceived by each character in a different way. Joe who is fed up with her silence and her crazy actions of stealing the baby and sitting in the street thinks that he is married to a crazy woman. He mourns, "...Wasn't I married to old crazy Violet?" (160)². The narrator of the story who also seems to witness Violet's public craziness and private cracks calls her crazy. Violet cutting of Dorcas' corpse makes the people of Lenox Avenue perceive her as a violent woman. In contrast, Alice judges Violet as a normal woman, who fights for her man. Felice after having a conversation with Violet, finds nothing crazy about Violet. Violet herself has plural moods and plural perceptions. She, in the beginning perceives Dorcas as her enemy. Later she comes to think of Dorcas as her own child that she miscarried. She even imagines singing in

harmony, "Don't you remember, a long time ago, two little babes..."(134)².

In the case of Joe, he is also perceived variously by the other characters. For Violet, Joe is an exceptional man and she takes pride in possessing him till the affair of Joe with Dorcas. She has an uneasy feeling that she is a surrogate for someone (especially his unknown mother, Wild) in his mind. But soon she understands Joe as he is. Whereas Alice on the other hand who had been thinking of Joe as a nice man, gets dejected when Joe murders Dorcas. Like Alice, the total Lenox Avenue curses Joe as murderer. Even Joe's lover, Dorcas before her death accuses Joe for not caring for her personality. But Dorcas revises her perception of Joe. The murder seems to bring her self-realization and she refuses to call Joe murderer. Unlike other characters, Dorcas' friend Felice shows a fatherly affection towards Joe. For her, Joe is a nice person: "He is like a kid when he laughs"(241)². But the narrator of the story who considered Joe as innocent later suspects that Joe might be a wrong person, who has loose thoughts.

Dorcas, for Joe, is the girl who makes his life meaningful. For him, her face looks calm and generous. He substituted her for his missing mother Wild and his unborn child. In the excess of his crazy mood, Joe even calls Dorcas, Wild. When Dorcas rejects Joe, the frustration and disappointment is so great that he ventures to kill Dorcas. But Violet complains that Joe, "...Won't work. Can't sleep. Grieves all day, all night.." (25)² after the death of Dorcas. For Violet, the face of Dorcas looks greedy, haughty and lazy. Violet says that Dorcas has fallen in love with the man, "...old enough to be her father"(117)². Later when she realizes that the tragedy Dorcas gone through in her childhood has affected her character, Violet started considering her as her child that she miscarried.

Alice, Dorcas' aunt who had a lot of expectations of Dorcas that she would lead a disciplined life fails in it and judges Dorcas as a rebellious, wild creature of the City which leads her to the tragic death. For Felice, Dorcas is a girl who cheats people especially men. Dorcas has cheated Joe, who loved her truly as Felice herself had loved Dorcas. She is not sympathetic towards her. For her, the love affair of Dorcas with Joe is opportunistic and therefore, she considers her death as a kind of punishment. The narrator of the story also suspects Dorcas as a girl with a pack of lies. Dorcas herself is not stable in her emotions

and responses. She truly loves Joe at one point of time. Later, her responses become different as she becomes closer to Acton for several reasons. She tries to avoid Joe. However at the end of her life she becomes loyal to Joe by not revealing him as her killer. The Plural moods and perceptions bring out the multidimensionality of Dorcas' character.

The characters in Morrison's novels are complex individuals. None of them is all good or all bad. Polyphony never allows the reader to settle on anyone mood or perception of the character, either good or bad. The rigidity is problematized and it brings the many dimensional picture of the black experience which symbolizes the helplessness of blacks, be it on the racial, social or individual level and that leads them to move in the direction of tragedy. Joe desires for the motherly love and a happy life with Violet. He tries to attain the lost motherly love atleast from Dorcas but failed in all these attempts.

Morrison's characters usually discover that they must go back to their African heritage, if they are to find themselves in the fullest sense. Violet desires for a happy life with Joe and she craves for children. These basic desires are not actualized and she becomes crazy. Even Dorcas who demands simple human love meets her death. This tragic atmosphere runs throughout the novel as Blues, the major tenor of *Jazz* performance. But at the end, there is an assured sense of seriousness of life

by the reunion of Joe with Violet and by the substitution of Felice for Dorcas, which resembles the upbeat, sensual Ragtime of *Jazz*.

6. Conclusion

Toni Morrison's commitment is fulfilled by bringing about the actual picture of the black society in the United States through her rendering of the experiences of her characters in the novel *Jazz* through her chosen narrative technique that is committed to her ideology of social concerns. In this context it will not be an exaggeration to say that technique is content. This could be well said so because Toni Morrison's appropriation of the *Jazz* mode as a narrative technique well synchronizes with the content of her novel. The pain, the expectations, the frustrations, the problems, the solutions, nonsolutions, love, hatred, anger, violence and affection of her people that she wanted to bring through her writings, are well brought out through the fusion of *Jazz* and *Jazz* music.

7. References

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